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United States
Department of
Agriculture



Food Safety
and Quality
Service

Food Safety in Serving the Public

The last thing food service operators want is for people to get sick after eating one of their meals. Most operators do a good job, but just one outbreak of foodborne illness--and the public will forget their long record of excellence.

Food poisoning can be caused by the excessive growth of certain bacteria during the mishandling of potentially hazardous foods, including meat and poultry products. Some unpleasant symptoms of foodborne illness include headache, diarrhea, vomiting, and stomach cramps--some of which may last for several hours or even days. Several bacteria known to cause food poisoning are Salmonella, Staphylococcus aureus ("staph"), Clostridium perfringens, and Clostridium botulinum.

Food poisoning can be prevented. The following are tips for safe handling of meat and poultry foods. However, other potentially hazardous foods--such as custards, potato salad, eggs, milk, and fish--require equally careful handling to protect the public health.

Buy Safe Food

As food service operators you must be concerned with buying safe and wholesome food. Inspect food products as to their sanitary condition before accepting them. Buy from reliable sources. Make sure meat and poultry is cold when unloading from the delivery truck. Frozen products should be solid.

Do not buy or use processed meat or poultry products from containers with these faults: leaking, bulging, or damaged cans; cracked jars or jars with loose lids. Do not taste or use food with a foul odor or when liquid spurts from the container when you open it. These foods could contain the rare, but often fatal, botulinal poison.

To help you with your purchases, FSQS offers a food acceptance service on a fee basis which provides impartial evaluation and certification that food purchases meet contract specifications. Any hospital, hotel, restaurant, governmental agency, educational institution, airline, or other public or private groups buying food in large quantities may benefit from the service. Suppliers often use the acceptance service to assure that they meet contract specifications.

If you are interested in the acceptance service, contact the nearest grading office of USDA's Food Safety and Quality Service. If you cannot locate a nearby grading representative, write to the appropriate commodity division in Washington, D.C.

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For poultry, eggs, egg products, and dairy products, contact the Poultry and Dairy Quality Division; for meat and meat products, the Meat Quality Division; for fresh and processed fruits and vegetables, the Fruit and Vegetable Quality Division. The headquarters address for each division is Food Safety and Quality Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.

Keep It Hot

Most germs that cause food poisoning are killed when meat and poultry foods are cooked. Meat, poultry, poultry stuffings, stuffed meats, and stuffing containing meat should be completely cooked with no interruption in the cooking process. Cook in small batches. Once the food is cooked, keep it hot until serving. Since temperatures between 40° and 120°F (4°C and 49°C), permit growth of bacteria (including those that could cause food poisoning), food should remain in this critical temperature zone for no more than 2 hours. Cook all beef cuts to an internal temperature of 145°F (63°C). Cook pork to at least 170°F (72°C).

Meat and poultry foods that have been cooked and then refrigerated should be reheated rapidly to at least 165°F (70°C) internal temperature before serving. Steamtables, double boilers, warmers, and similar hot-food holding facilities are not suitable for the reheating of potentially hazardous foods, but should be set to 140°F (60°C) or higher to maintain reheated foods.

Keep It Cold

Raw or cooked meats and poultry must be stored below 40°F (4°C). Cooked foods should be used within 2 to 3 days, preferably within 24 hours. Don't refrigerate cooked meat and poultry a second time after they have been removed from refrigeration and reheated for serving. The extra handling may increase the opportunity for bacterial growth. Raw meats and poultry should be stored separately from cooked foods to prevent cross contamination.

Large quantities of hot foods need to be partially cooled before they are refrigerated to avoid raising the temperature of the refrigerator. Cooling a roast or fowl may be speeded by placing it in front of a fan or by setting the food container in a large container or sink filled with cold water. Liquid foods, such as soups and stews, can be cooled by pouring them into shallow pans and stirring occasionally.

Foods that are served cold, including cold meats, need refrigeration until serving time. Never keep cooked meat and poultry products at room temperature for more than 2 hours, including preparation time. In preparing meat or poultry salads, thoroughly chill all ingredients.

Store food in the freezer at 0°F (-18°C) or below. Date products. Use oldest first. Store all meat and poultry in shallow pans not more than 4 inches deep. To thaw a frozen food product, place the wrapped product into the refrigerator and thaw completely. Thawing will take from several hours to a couple days (for a large turkey or roast). For quicker thawing, frozen products may be thawed in water-tight packages under running cold water (or frequent cold water changes), in air-tight double paper bags at room temperature, or in a microwave oven. Cook food promptly after thawing. A product weighing less than 3 pounds may be cooked frozen.

Keep It Clean

If you keep germs off meat and poultry products, you avoid problems. Keep utensils, work surfaces, kitchen equipment, and serving equipment soap-and-hot-water clean. Some areas may require sanitizing with special chemicals to guarantee protection for you and your customers; check with local health officials on requirements. All food-contact equipment should be easy to clean--this means surfaces that are readily accessible and made of materials that may be properly sanitized. Such equipment includes slicers, mixers, meatblocks, tables, counters, refrigerators, and steamtables.

It is equally important to keep hands clean. Germs are a natural part of the environment--you have to keep washing them off. After handling raw meats, wash your hands before touching other foods or food surfaces. Suppose you carry raw hamburgers to the grill on a platter, then, without washing it, use the same platter for the cooked hamburgers. Result? Germs on your cooked hamburgers.

At all times--during storage, preparation, display, and service--food should be protected from dust, insects, rodents, unclean equipment, unnecessary handling, coughs and sneezes, and overhead drips or leaks.

Food on display should be protected from consumer contamination, too, by using packaging, serving-line protector devices, display cases, or other effective means. Serve hot products immediately after preparation, if possible. Workers with severe colds, diarrhea, sores or fever should not be allowed to handle, prepare or serve food.

Most foodborne-poisoning outbreaks are caused by failure of food-service personnel to follow good food-handling practices. Also, each and every worker must follow accepted practices of sanitation and cleanliness.

Training
Personnel

New employees must have proper orientation before starting on the job. Experienced employees should have continuing on-the-job reminders of the requirements for food safety.

Reminder -- for safe food service: Keep it hot.
 Keep it cold.
 Keep it clean.

For further information write for:

"Wall Chart--Food Safety Tips for Large Quantity Users." It is a handy reference chart for kitchen workers in large feeding operations. For a free copy, write to: FSQS Information, Food Safety and Quality Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.